

BUYING HELP

INTRODUCTION

If you don't know what type of product you need, or you're wondering whether or not a particular product will work with your computer, contact *Buying Help*.

If you want to buy a new desktop or notebook computer, please provide details of how much you want to spend and the type of tasks you want your new PC to perform.

If you're looking to buy an upgrade for your computer, you need to include as much information about your current system as possible. Knowing your computer make and model, processor, amount of memory and motherboard model can help us to provide a more accurate advice.

Chris Finnamore

Our Labs Manager can recommend the best product for your specific requirements.

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HDMI resolution needed

Q I'm the proud owner of a 32in LCD TV, which I bought about 18 months ago. It has two HDMI ports, and I would like to use it as part of a media centre I am thinking of building. The TV's manual tells me the display resolution is WXGA (1,366x768).

Is there a graphics card that will display this resolution when connected with an HDMI cable? I tried connecting my son's Dell Dimension 9200, which has an ATI Radeon X1550 card, using a DVI to HDMI converter. The best picture I could get had a narrow black band about a centimetre wide between the edge of the displayed picture and the edge of the display.

Bob Greenwood

A The resolution your TV can display when connected to a PC depends on the TV rather than the graphics card. As they're mainly designed to display standard high-definition resolutions such as 720p, many LCD TVs can't display a PC's input at the TV's native resolution. Instead, the TV expects a lower-resolution input which it then upscales to fill the screen. If the input resolution isn't a standard HD resolution, the upscaled result will look strange.

The best way to get your TV to upscale properly is to set your PC to the standard HD resolution of 1,280x720 pixels. The TV should now upscale properly.

However, if you want to display high definition video on HD-DVD or Blu-Ray discs, you'll need an HDCP-compliant graphics card. Sapphire's Radeon HD 2400 XT (reviewed in *Labs, Shopper* October 2007) costs £43 from www.aria.co.uk and has an HDCP-compliant HDMI output, which can carry both video and audio signals from your PC to your TV.



▲ Sapphire's Radeon HD 2400 XT has an HDCP-compliant HDMI output to connect to an LCD TV

Gaming on a budget

Q I would like to replace the graphics card in my Aries Performa 5100 Ultra Pro AMD, which I bought in October 2004. Can you recommend a decent card, bearing in mind that I hate letting the moths out of my wallet? My puny system consists of an AMD Athlon XP 3000+ processor, MSI Nvidia nForce2 motherboard, 128MB Nvidia GeForce4 integrated 128bit 3D graphics and 512MB of PC2700 DDR memory.

Paul Tricker

A Your processor should still be fine for gaming, but the integrated graphics are no good for modern games. As your motherboard has an AGP slot, your choice of graphics card is limited. There's one AGP card that can play current games, but stocks are running out fast. Sapphire's X1950 Pro AGP (which won a Best Buy award in *What's New, Shopper* April 2007) can play current games at acceptable detail levels and costs £116 including VAT from www.novatech.co.uk. Get one quickly before they all go!

Home print shop advice

Q My wife's hobby is producing greeting cards. We find that if we use decent-quality card stock (200gsm and above) we wear out the feed mechanisms on inkjet printers quickly. The print quality is also a bit suspect if it's not used regularly, and regular print head cleaning is required.

We need a colour laser printer that will print card stock. An OKI printer has been suggested, but we have never been able to test one. Any other suggestions would be appreciated.

Andrew Walton

A In our last colour laser *Labs* in *Shopper* May 2007, there were six colour laser printers that could print on 200gsm (or higher) paper. If you're on a budget, Konica Minolta's Magicolor 2500W is a good buy. This printer, which won a Budget Buy award, has a maximum paper weight of 200gsm, has good-quality mono and colour printing and is fairly cheap to run.

However, if you've got a bit more to spend, go for



▲ Dell's 3110cn handles thick paper and is cheap to run

Dell's Colour Laser Printer 3110cn. This printer, which won a Best Buy, can handle up to 215gsm paper, has good print quality as long as you use the PostScript driver, and is cheap to maintain and run.

Taking flight

Q I'm a so-called 'silver surfer' and am newly retired. I've owned an HP Pavilion Desktop for about four years. It has been adequate for my needs so far, but I regularly play Flight Simulator X with a lot of the 'add-ons' and quality of gaming is suffering.

My HP computer has a Celeron Socket 478 processor, which is connected to an MSI MS-6577 3.1 motherboard. I recently upgraded the RAM to 1GB. I'm leaning towards building my own PC, and this is where I'm running into difficulties.

The hard disk is 120GB, which is sufficient for my needs, and I am guessing it uses the old IDE connector. All the new motherboards that I've seen have SATA connectors, although most also come with a single IDE connector. I'm running Windows XP Home Edition, which was preloaded on my PC. Unfortunately, it didn't come with the original disc. I'm guessing that I would need to buy a new copy of Windows XP. Is this correct? Also, if I buy a new hard disk, can I copy over all my existing programs using Acronis True Image?

I would like your recommendations for a case, power supply, motherboard, processor and graphics card, of sufficient power to let me run Flight Simulator X and its add-ons with no problems.

Mike Hill

A Flight Simulator X is a demanding game, both on your graphics card and processor. If you want to keep your current PC, you'll have some trouble upgrading your processor and graphics card, as your motherboard uses an outdated Socket

478 processor socket and AGP graphics card slot. As you have said, you would be better off building a new PC.

Your 120GB hard disk is big enough for most needs, so you shouldn't have to upgrade it. If it's as old as the rest of your PC, it will be an IDE rather than SATA disk. This shouldn't be a problem, though. While modern motherboards have SATA connectors, they also have an IDE port. One IDE port can support up to two IDE devices, so as long as you just want one hard disk and one optical drive you'll be fine. You can also buy a SATA-to-IDE converter from <http://tinyurl.com/2f4zus> that plugs into the back of an IDE drive and lets you plug it into a normal SATA port.

Unfortunately, you won't be able to use the copy of Windows XP again, as it was preloaded and will work only with that PC. As you're building your own PC, though, you qualify for a discounted Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) version of Windows XP or Vista, which is significantly cheaper than the retail version. You can buy the OEM version as long as you buy an internal PC component such as a motherboard along with it. Bear in mind that once you have activated an OEM version it's locked to your PC's hardware, and you won't be able to change central components such as your motherboard.

You also won't be able to use Acronis to copy across your programs to your new PC. When you install a program, it writes files to the Windows



▲ If you want the best graphics Flight Simulator X can offer, you may need to build a new PC

System directory and makes entries in the Registry, so the program won't work properly if you just copy its files to your new PC. You'll need to install the programs from the original installation discs. Make sure you copy any files you need from your hard disk to a CD or external hard disk before you install it in your new PC and install Windows.

As far as components are concerned, we would recommend the following for Flight Simulator X: an Intel Core 2 Duo E6750 processor (Best Buy, *Shopper* October 2007), a Gigabyte P35-DS3R motherboard (Budget Buy, *Shopper* November 2007), a Sapphire X1950 Pro 256MB graphics card (Budget Buy, *Shopper* October 2007) and 2GB of DDR2-800 RAM (see *Labs*, page 110). You should also consider a case with a 600W power supply.

Help with dual displays

Q I need to buy a notebook to use with a projector. The software I will be using sends a different picture to the projector to the one going to the laptop, and requires dual monitor capability.

Most notebooks have a VGA or other output suitable for use with a projector, but how can I be sure that the machine can produce two different pictures instead of merely repeating the notebook screen? I know I will need to activate the dual monitor function in Windows.

Can you suggest a suitable machine? The software's minimum requirements are 1GB of RAM, a 2GHz dual-core processor and 256MB of graphics memory. The notebook may be used for projecting DVDs and PowerPoint presentations. I'm hoping to spend no more than £500.

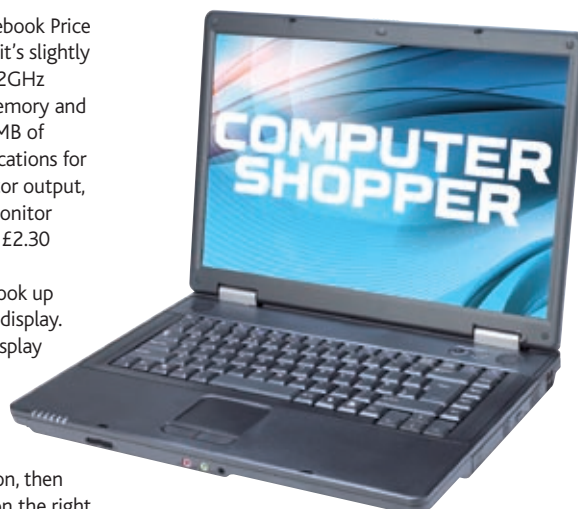
John Wright

A Any notebook with a monitor output should support an extra display. Getting a £500 notebook with the recommended specifications for the software is tricky, but PC Nextday's Zoostorm 4-5628,

which is reviewed in this month's Notebook Price Test on page 78, comes close. At £569 it's slightly over your budget, but it comes with a 2GHz dual-core processor, 1GB of system memory and a dedicated graphics chipset with 256MB of RAM, so it meets the minimum specifications for the software. It has a digital DVI monitor output, but if your projector has only a VGA monitor input then you can buy an adaptor for £2.30 from <http://tinyurl.com/2zp32f>.

The tricky part is setting the notebook up to display the right image on the right display. Turn your projector on, and plug the display lead into the notebook's monitor port. Windows Vista will display a New Display Detected window. Click the 'Show different parts of my desktop on each display (extended)' radio button, then select whether the external display is on the right or left of your notebook. Then click OK.

The external display's default resolution may not be correct for your projector. To change it, right-click on a blank area of your desktop and click Personalize. Now click the Display Settings link. This will bring up a graphical representation of your monitors. Click on the Identify Monitors



▲ PC Nextday's Zoostorm 4-5628 supports external displays, is powerful and is good value

button to see which monitor is number 1 and which is 2. Then click on the icon for your external display, adjust the resolution slider to the correct resolution and click OK.